

VZCZCXR07235
RR RUEHPA
DE RUEHBP #0058/01 0281640
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 281640Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAMAKO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9953
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 0548
RHMFIS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 000058

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/13/2019
TAGS: PGOV PINR PINS ASEC PREL ML
SUBJECT: BAHANGA RELEASES LAST THREE MALIAN SOLDIERS

REF: A. BAMAKO 00047
 1B. 08 BAMAKO 00482
 1C. BAMAKO 00037

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) Summary: On January 25 Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim ag Bahanga released the last three Malian military officers held hostage by the Northern Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC). Bahanga's decision followed the January 12 capture of 8 Tuareg rebels by the Malian government and losses incurred during a January 22 battle with the Malian army near Bourghessa north of Kidal (Ref. A). Following the liberation of the three officers, the ATNMC called for Mali to liberate recently captured rebels and requested a brief cease-fire. Previously Bahanga has liberated Malian soldiers following protracted negotiations with government and local Tuareg leaders, or the intervention - likely accompanied by monetary settlements - of other actors like Libya. This time, it is unclear whether Bahanga is hoping to swap the three Malian officers for the rebels captured earlier this month, or is trying to buy time for the ATNMC to lick its wounds following the Battle of Bourghessa. End Summary.

Liberation Follows Battle in Bourghessa

2.(U) On the morning of January 25, three Malian soldiers held hostage by Tuareg rebels under the command of Ibrahim ag Bahanga were released and returned to Malian military units based in Kidal. In a communique issued later the same day, Malian President Amadou Toumani Toure noted that the three soldiers were the last Malian military personnel held hostage by Bahanga or any other group, and thanked leaders in the region of Kidal who had been working with him to secure the soldiers' release. President Toure attributed the release to "a policy of firmness in the defense of the higher national interest and a constant willingness to seek through dialogue solutions to the problems of northern Mali." The President also thanked certain unnamed "persons of note" who played an influential role in securing the soldiers' release.

3.(C) Those working behind the scenes included the National Assembly Deputy from Kidal, Alghabass ag Intallah, and Elladi ag Alla who is credited with starting Mali's first Tuareg rebellion in 1963 and is now based in Bourghessa. The hostages were reportedly handed over to ag Alla. The president of Kidal's Regional Assembly, Intahmadou ag Albachir, may have also played a role in the negotiations. ADC leader Iyad ag Ghali, who is still in Mali but keeping an extremely low profile, was also likely involved.

4.(U) The liberation occurred days after the January 22 battle between Malian forces and Bahanga's ATNMC. An unnamed ATNMC member told the media on January 23 that more than 40 Malian army vehicles and twenty more vehicles belonging to the Imghad Tuareg militia had attacked an ATNMC patrol

composed of three 4x4s. Bahanga's Paris-based father in law and ATNMC spokesman Hama ag Sid'Ahmed issued a statement, also on January 23, declaring that the ATNMC had been attacked by 420 Malian soldiers and 160 militia members led by three Colonels. This was a reference to the Imghad Tuareg militia led by Col. Elhedj Gamou. One of the other Colonels was Col. Mohamed Abderahmane ould Meydou, an ethnic Arab. In contrast to Malian claims to have killed 31 rebels, Sid'Ahmed said six Tuaregs were captured at a check point but no ATNMC members were killed. Sid'Ahmed claimed that 26 members of the Malian armed forces were killed and another 32 wounded.

5.(C) According to the ATNMC, one of the wounded on the Malian side is Ahmadou Badi, who was convicted for the 1999 carjacking and murder of a Danish citizen in Mali. Badi "escaped" from prison in 2004 and disappeared until mid-2008 when he materialized as one of the leaders of the Imghad Tuareg militia organized by Col. Gamou and the Malian government to fight Tuareg rebels (Ref. B).

Generosity, Retreat, or Quid Pro Quo?

6.(C) Bahanga's decision could be interpreted as a vindication for President Toure's new decision to meet force with force and the Malian army's apparent victory in Bourghessa. On January 26, two days after liberating the three Malian officers, another spokesman for Bahanga and the ATNMC told Agence France Presse: "Now that we have released the last Malian soldiers, the government, on its side, must release the Tuaregs it has arrested." Mali captured 8 Tuareg

BAMAKO 00000058 002 OF 002

rebels near the town of Tin-Essako in northern Mali on January 12 (Ref. C). This group, which included a senior rebel figure Ahmed Anakib, was transferred to Bamako on January 14. One of the eight prisoners died in Malian custody on January 15. Mali has repeatedly denied or delayed requests by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) to visit the remaining 7 prisoners. The body of the deceased prisoner was given to the Algerians for an independent autopsy.

Comment: Did Bahanga Blink?

7.(C) Bahanga's decision to release his remaining three Malian hostages, the last of more than 60 hostages captured in 2008, was likely the result of two factors: the January 12 capture of Anakib and seven others, and damage incurred during the January 22 battle of Bourghessa. On January 28 National Assembly Deputy and influential Kidal Tuareg leader Alghabass ag Intallah told the Embassy that, in his opinion, Bahanga was hoping the Malian government would release the rebels captured on January 12. Ag Intallah noted, however, that he would have expected such a hand over to pass through the Red Cross and expressed some bewilderment as to why the liberation did not go through this channel. One explanation could be Mali's refusal to give the ICRC access to the newly captured rebels now in Bamako. On January 16 one Malian official did tell the Embassy that he was encouraging President Toure to barter the captured rebels for the three Malian officers still held by Bahanga. ATNMC losses at Bourghessa may have accelerated this process. To our knowledge, the remaining 7 rebels captured on January 12, including Ahmed Anakib, are still in Bamako.

MILOVANOVIC